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ABSTRACT

Communications research and social science analysis are considered to have revealed several essential features in the communications environment of American citizens. The purpose of this article is to consider the way these features affect low-income members of society, particularly minorities living in urban areas. Communications networks in the U.S. are stated to be increasingly shaped by large-scale, highly organized systems in industry, government, education, and other social services. Within the networks, information is shared, problems are confronted, and policies are adopted which affect the lives of all citizens. Individuals and groups which do not have influence within the organizational communications networks will inevitably have unsatisfactory decisions imposed upon them. Since the poor are considered to be effectively excluded from centers of power and control, they do not participate in the communications networks. The poor are also said to be isolated from the important communications networks by a language barrier. It is held that researchers have found that the poor lack meaningful information and knowledge. Although the operation of communication networks attached to educational and social service organizations in low-income communities is considered open to question, it is asserted that opportunities for improving communications networks are many. (Author/JM)

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Communications Networks and the Urban Poor

by Neal H. Hurwitz

Communications research and social science analysis have revealed several essential features in the communications environment of American citizens. In this article, we will consider the way these features affect low-income members of our society, particularly minorities living in urban areas.

Organizational Networks

Communications networks in the United States are increasingly shaped by large-scale, highly organized systems in industry, government education, and other social services. Such systems are characteristic of cultures which are technologically advanced, highly industrialized, urbanized, and socially stratified. In each area of social activity, important functions such as production of material goods, maintenance of public order, and delivery of services in health care, welfare, and formal education are exercised by large-scale organizations instead of the primary groups or associations of neighborhood and community life. Controls and resources are centralized and concentrated within the large-scale organizations. As these systems become the crucial guidance mechanisms for the whole society, intra- and inter-organizational communications networks become decisive vehicles for transmitting messages with wide effect. Within the networks, information is shared, problems are confronted, and policies are adopted which affect the lives of all citizens.[1]

Because individuals and groups which do not have influence within the organizational communications networks will inevitably have unsatisfactory decisions imposed upon them, the importance of access to influence within the networks cannot be overstated. If the networks do not allow and encourage participation by diverse individuals and groups, the interests and value-choices of these parties will never be represented or heard, much less acted upon. Despite this obvious fact, the organized systems of industry, government, education, and the social services presently exclude many interest groups, among them the American low-income population. Since the poor are effectively excluded from the centers of power and control in the United States, they do not participate in the communications networks of the organizational system. Thus, the relationship of the poor to the communications dominant in America reflects their powerless position in the national polity.

Language Differences

In addition to organizational exclusion, the poor are also isolated from the important communications networks by a language barrier. This problem has several aspects, but the one with broadest implications is the growing use of a logico-mathematical or highly technical mode of communications within the organizational networks. This form of language suits the rationalizing forces in modern organizations and is contingent upon the twentieth century triumph of what the sociologist Max Horkheimer calls "instrumental reason." Such reason demands finding "means for the goals one adopts at any given time."[2] It requires an instrumental or technological competence – and the language that goes with it – as a condition of adequate performance. Consequently, in the modern American organization, technicians, specialists, experts, and professionals – the people who know the language better than others – become an elite.

Organizational systems use rationalized communications to exert greater and more precise controls over the subjects of their activities, including people, places, and things. Similarly, technical and professional elites often use rationalized language to maintain their own controls, in part by "mystifying" their roles and functions. Thus, rationalized communications fit the requirements of the impersonal and routinized bureaucracy, and often meet the self-interested needs of members of the organizational elites. The rationalized mode, however, is vir-

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tually unrelated to the communicative competencies of most citizens. People are generally attuned to the personal, expressive, and immediate communications of primary groups and associations in the home, the neighborhood, and the community. They have little access to the highly technical language of most intra- and inter-organizational communications where the important action takes place.

This language difference, therefore, eliminates many organizational systems from public understanding. In particular, the urban poor are left out because levels of literacy are low among them and access to professional help in interpreting organizational communications is infrequent. In such circumstances, the poor are again excluded from participation in essential organizational systems and the communications networks attached to them. More important, the accountability of such systems to citizens is oftentimes effectively prevented since the general public cannot understand what is going on.

Although researchers and analysts argue that the poor are not alone in their isolation from the power centers of this society, they are more severely affected than other groups by present communications patterns.

Lack of Information

Researchers have found that the poor live in a communications environment devoid of meaningful information and knowledge. In this environment, the absence of useful information – or the presence of misinformation – supports the condition of powerlessness by paralyzing individual and group initiative, and blocking self-interested organization within disenfranchised groups. While scholars state, "To live effectively is to live with adequate information" and "Information is power," they observe that the poor have limited access to information resources.[3] The political scientist Robert Dahl points out that unequal or limited distribution of resources results in unequal and limited capacities "to make personal choices, [and] to the extent that the capacity to make personal choices . . . is unequally distributed then freedom and opportunity are unequal."[4]

The information needs of the poor are unmet for a number of reasons. For example, critical analysts charge that many of the messages reaching general and low-income populations through established communications networks contain misleading or distorted information. Such falsification results from a public relations approach to communications in which techniques of persuasion play an important role. On the other hand, organizations may withhold information of interest to the public. The information needs of citizens cannot be satisfied by this distribution of misinformation (through manipulation) or by the absence of vital information (through secrecy). This is especially serious in a democratic society which presumes the presence of a widely informed electorate.

Failure of Local Networks

Recent events have focused attention on malpractices in information dissemination by corporations and government agencies. The operation of communications networks attached to education and social service organizations in low-income communities is also open to question. These networks frequently fail to reach parent and client groups. Communications linkages between schools and the communities they serve are weak; information-sharing between bureaucratic social service agencies and their clients is insubstantial. When communications are initiated, they are usually one-way messages from organizational centers to public groups. In most cases, these messages are controlled by administrative and professional elites. In fact, educational and social service agencies usually choose *not* to communicate and share information with the poor.

In contrast to the smaller-scale, personal groups of community life, local social service systems represent highly-organized, large-scale, and frequently bureaucratized associations. These systems have centralized controls over their functions, resources, and personnel. They concentrate and monopolize public service activities. Yet, typically, in low-income communities, such systems are cut off from the people they serve.

As the sociologist Herbert Gans describes them, "caretaker" agencies serve the interests of their organizational staff before they serve the interests of residents of the neighborhoods in which they are located.[5] The caretaker institutions in communities of the poor exist first and foremost to meet the demands of the wider society. These demands may include benefits to staff, but often contradict the needs of local populations. In some cases, when both staff and client groups suffer the consequences brought on by contradictions between social demands and client needs, the organization – such as the local school – is caught in the middle. For the most part, however, communications networks maintained by public service agencies are controlled by organizational personnel. Participation by client groups in problem-solving, information-sharing, and decision-making is minimal when it occurs at all.

Federal and state guidelines and regulations for the use of public monies by such agencies often include provisions for the participation of low-income and minority group persons in program planning, budgeting, and review. However, this technical requirement cannot overcome the absence of effective linkages – patterns of interaction which create a bond among participants* – and information-sharing between agencies and clients. Moreover, recent research in this area has shown that the low-income or minority participants in federally- or state-mandated advisory councils are perceived by members of the rest of the community as a new elite still far removed from indigenous community concerns.[6]

Under these circumstances, messages from local service systems are "underused and little trusted" by the poor.[7] The low-income citizen turns off to communications distributed by agencies which he or she feels "attempt to get their clients to adjust to the status quo. The law, police, and government agencies are viewed as exploiters of the low-income community."[8] This point of view is substantiated by several studies which suggest that "bureaucratic service agencies are concerned primarily with self-maintenance," and not with the interests of the people they serve.[9] One researcher characterized messages distributed by local schools as "public relations . . . for manipulative purposes rather than for . . . assistance."[10]

The public relations approach supports the *status quo*,

*This concept of linkages derives from the work of Ronald Havelock.

defines the citizen-client as a "dependent consumer," reinforces professional and administrative control, and perpetuates autonomy within isolated bureaucracies.[11] It prohibits the alternative in which the client-citizen and the professional-administrator share control in a revitalized, two-way communications network. In a two-way communications system, linkages between organizations and community groups can be strengthened. More plentiful, accurate, and helpful information can be shared by the involved parties. In effect, communications processes can be democratized.

"Reciprocal Misunderstandings"

The inefficiency of the communications networks maintained by social service agencies in communities of the urban poor is repeatedly demonstrated by "reciprocal misunderstandings."[12] It is easy to blame one group or the other for these problems. Certainly, the organizational elites can be charged with greater responsibility simply because they have greater power and control over existing networks. Yet, the problem is less simple than that. As one communications analyst, the theoretician Jurgen Habermas, has observed, "Only a neutral observer notices that the participants do not understand one another."[13] Each side has an inaccurate and distorted image of what the other side feels, wants, and believes. Unless the fundamental misconceptions are corrected, the potential for conflict remains. The ineffective communications networks which exist and are maintained by a few do not help matters.

Improving Communications

Opportunities for improving communications networks attached to organizational systems are many. Technical assistance by communications specialists can be of aid. Yet, these improvements must be linked to expanded access to power and influence for individuals and groups not presently represented within such organizations. The process of improving networks – including strengthened communications linkages and information-sharing among participants – can and should be linked to the establishment of more democratic governance systems within organizations. In this way, all parties can participate more fully. The goal is a better decision-making process based on more adequate information and it can be achieved only if changes in communications procedures include fuller representation of the different interests and values involved.

In considering the selection, design, and implementation of improved communications linkages and information-sharing, three key questions must be answered:

First, How are participants empowered within the new communications framework?

Second, What is the nature and quality of the information to be shared?

Third, Whose interests are served by the new communications program?

Systems which equalize the resources available to participating interest groups are more likely to succeed than those which maintain unequal resource allocations. Similarly, positive gains can be expected when participants share control over information-sharing, problem-solving, and decision-making.

Other conditions among the poor also reduce their chances for receiving communications containing the information and knowledge necessary for effective everyday choices. Among these are low use of all print media, very high use of electronic mass communications, especially television, and frequent participation in isolated intra-community communications networks. Coupled with their exclusion from the networks of the dominant organizational systems, these factors combine to place the poor in a communications environment devoid of meaningful information and knowledge.

Low Use of Print Media

Poor people are the lowest users of all print media in American society, even though print communications – books, newspapers, and magazines, for example – are widely regarded as the most effective means of transmitting information and knowledge in our culture. One research study found that "40% of [the] low-income adult sample read less than one hour a week in any print medium."[14]

> **"The average low-income adult spends almost one-half a 16-hour waking day on electronic media—four to six hours with television alone."**

An explanation for these findings is the low levels of literacy among the poor. Low literacy levels translate into low use of print media. The severity of this situation is stated by psychologist John B. Carroll, a student of learning and instruction:

> Let us come to terms with reality. Given the widespread use of print in our culture . . . given the fact that the complex ideas that our citizens must be able to handle can hardly be stated in language of a lower level of difficulty than what is recognized as 'twelfth-grade reading difficulty,' and given the ideal of a universal education . . . there can be no reasonable alternative to a goal of twelfth-grade level of literacy for all, or nearly all, our citizens.[15]

Although there is no assurance that people will read because they are taught to do so, it is certain that many poor people do not read now because they are illiterate. (The overlap between the estimated 20 million Americans who are illiterate and the poor population has been established in recent surveys.) Clearly, our educational institutions have failed to serve the needs of millions of people and have contributed to their relative powerlessness by isolating them from the principal repositories of information and knowledge in our culture – the print media. In all, the information to be found in print is unavailable to the poor more frequently than to any other group.

High Use of Television

Television and radio provide the poor with most of the infor-

mation and knowledge they receive through communications networks operated by the organizational systems of the wider society (or, as some researchers have called it, "The Establishment"). Studies show that the use of electronic communications systems (including phonograph recordings) by the poor is very high. In fact, the statistics are startling: "The average low-income adult," a comprehensive report states, "spends *almost one-half a 16-hour waking day on electronic media. . .*" This figure is "compared to one-fourth a waking day for general population respondents."[16] Most members of low-income groups spend four to six hours daily with television alone.

Much has been written about this phenomenon. Many have speculated on the impact of the electronic media, especially television. There is evidence that television can be used as a learning experience affecting both cognitive and affective functions in the individual. Television, it is said, teaches through a "hidden curriculum," presenting a "lesson plan that . . . everyone learns," according to George Gerbner, the communications scholar.[17] Although this hidden curriculum has powerful effects upon us all, it is especially potent for the poor who are exposed more frequently. This is an important fact, since both social science research and media analysis suggest that while television can be a powerful educator, its present programming supports a distorted view of reality and everyday life. It is to this programming that the poor are exposed "one-half a 16-hour waking day."

The electronic media networks, whose reach is so extensive in the United States, are essentially one-way message systems run by large-scale organizations for profit. In 1972-1973, of the 8,000 radio and television stations in the country almost 7,500 were commercial stations.[18] These networks operate over publicly-owned airwaves and are regulated by the Federal Communications Commission. The organizations which broadcast are not necessarily representative of the diverse groups and interests that comprise American society. In fact, according to the United States Commission on Civil Rights, participation by minority group members in the ownership and day-to-day operation of radio and television stations is minimal. The poor, of course, do not own, nor do they participate. The Commission charged the FCC with failure to right this imbalance:

> While the FCC has adopted rules prohibiting its licensees from discriminating in their employment practices, its enforcement program has been highly inadequate . . . (The FCC also) continues to severely restrict minority involvement in the ownership of the industry it regulates. . ."*[19]

Absence of Feedback

The poor can exert pressure on the television industry only by switching off unsatisfactory programs or refusing to buy advertised products. For the most part, these are ineffective methods of communication, because media executives and the advertisers who pay for programming consider the poor a weak market. Although token concessions in both programming and representation in commercials have been made to ethnic minorities, especially the black middle-class, programs are usually designed to appeal to middle-income consumers.

Ironically, though the poor turn off to messages from local service agencies whose communications networks are controlled by others and exclude their influence, they turn on to radio and television stations which do the same thing. Studies show that the programming preferences of the poor match those of the general population. The only significant difference is that the poor watch more in each category of favorite shows: mysteries and suspense dramas, westerns, soap operas, and situation comedies. The information received through these programs makes very little difference in the lives of the poor. The programming reinforces some themes about everyday life, and distorts others. Specific and valuable information – for example, the reading of rights to persons about to be arrested now frequently shown on police dramas – is rare.

Reasons for Use

Some analysts suggest that the poor watch television to participate in the world-out-there from which they are excluded. Since its first broadcast, television has been understood as a medium for increasing felt bonds among people. The poor may be reaching out for contact with the society that excludes them. Others assert that while the middle-class viewer watches television to overcome boredom, the poor turn to television to avoid stress, gain stimulation, and expose themselves to an intrinsically interesting "school of life" on a regular basis.

In either case, there is also reason to suspect that television programming contributes to the development of what Erik Erikson calls the "negative identities" of oppressed groups.[20] Communications through the mass media in our materialistic, affluent, success-oriented society impinge adversely upon the self-concept of millions of Americans excluded from the rewards and benefits valued by the culture. Messages in the mass media reinforce meanings favorable to a particular cultural style (*eg.* white and male, middle-class and upwardly mobile) and unfavorable to others (*eg.* colored or foreign, female, non-competitive, non-materialistic, and so on). In particular, the presumed weaknesses and pathologies of lifestyles and philosophies outside the cultural mainstream are held up for disapprobation. The strengths and integrity of alternative ways of being are most often ignored.[21]

Lack of their Own Code

Communications analysts point out that the poor – among many others – are powerless precisely because they lack a "code of their own for the symbolic interpretation of messages encoded by a . . . system which represents the interests of other classes. They may or may not agree with a given message, but they have no alternative interpretation at their disposal if they have no code representing their own interests."[22] This may help explain why the poor so easily accept – and approve – television programming "which represents the interests of other classes" to make a profit, sell a product, and maintain power and influence in a system hostile to them.

Thus, the poor rate television communications high as an educational network. They place faith in messages coming to them through the tube from established commercial networks. "TV comes out on top as the most reliable medium, the most

*Minority groups include "Negroes, Orientals, American Indians, and Spanish Surnamed Americans" and, as of 1972, women.

important, the most preferred for world news, and the most believable. . . TV tells it like it is," states one report which summarized research findings.[23] Remarkably, "poor blacks saw TV as more real than poor whites."[24] In their study of low-income blacks in Cleveland, Bradley S. Greenberg, John Bowes, and Brenda Dervin found that high percentages of their sample population responded to the following statements positively:

"Your favorite TV show tells about life the way it really is" (50% agreed*)

"The same things that happen on TV often happen to you in real life" (60%)

"The people in your favorite TV shows (mysteries, crime dramas, soap operas, westerns, comedies – NHH) are like people you meet in real life" (63%)

"Families on your favorite TV shows are pretty much like families you see in real life" (63%)

The researchers observed that "more than 50% of 366 low-income black respondents agreed with all four statements indicating that TV presents an accurate portrayal of reality."[25] This point, of course, is disputed by many communications analysts who regard TV fare as unreal. These analysts see television as a distorted reflection of everyday life. Yet, in the Cleveland study, 73% of the respondents said they could "learn a lot" from television, 69% said they could "learn from the mistakes of others," and 61% said television "shows how other people solve the same problems they have."[26] (65% also said that television helps them "keep their minds off other things," and 39% said they watch because they "have nothing better to do."**)

While the poor show positive regard for the electronic media, communications researchers point out that the information and knowledge received through such networks do not contribute to the development of that group. "For the urban poor in the U.S.," Brenda Dervin and Bradley S. Greenberg argue, "communication . . . may be dysfunctional to development." They suggest that the "high use of television . . . leaves the American poor in an information void," and they cite the work of Serena Wade and Wilbur Schramm who noted that the electronic mass media are not the communications networks which "import understanding, new concepts, and interpretive ability" to citizens. "Rather," as noted earlier, "the print media do this task."[27]

Weakness of Community Networks

The single most immediate communications network affecting the poor is their intra-community, interpersonal system. Here, they have apparent power and influence, yet this network is very much shaped by the wider society which locks the low-income population into segregated residential areas. Moreover, because material resources within the low-income community are few and insubstantial, the poor are a dependent population. This is also true in the area of information and knowledge resources.

In spite of this impoverishment, the poor possess their own "street sense" and wisdom. In addition, much information is distributed in the intra-community network. Certain kinds of information, however, are notably absent. Messages in the low-income community are highly homogeneous, oriented towards gossip about family, friends, and neighbors. Few communications are about jobs and employment, crime, city and neighborhood problems, politics and government, welfare, education, news, the mass media, black unity, prejudice, and race hatred, according to the Cleveland study.[28]

The intra-community communications network is thus of little value to the poor in gaining the substantive information they need to make a difference in their lives.

The resources that would make the intra-community networks useful are located in the organizational systems mentioned earlier. Furthermore, the linkages and information-sharing procedures that could join these systems with the local, intra-community networks do not exist, or are weak. When present, such linkages and information dissemination mechanisms are often exploited by non-community groups, such as the organizational elites. The social service agencies and professional groups that could aid low-income residents are frequently ineffective; many are simply not interested in offering help. Thus, again, even where their own communications networks are concerned, the poor are cut off and isolated.[29]

Information and knowledge – like other resources in American society – are unevenly allocated. The poor are losers as a result. Their access to important resources is minimal and, seemingly, purposely limited by other groups with greater power and control. Either the poor must mobilize in their own self-interest – a task fraught with difficulty – or influential parties must be willing to press for changes and reforms. This process, as we know, is tedious and difficult to sustain. On the other hand, holding millions of people in a condition of poverty, dependence, and relative ignorance about important matters is a dangerous violation of the democratic spirit that has ennobled this country for two centuries. What we need, then, is a renewed commitment to the equalization of resources available to citizens – including information resources – for the improvement of their chances for free and full lives.

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FOOTNOTES AND REFERENCES

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*"In one of the studies," Dervin and Greenberg report, "the questions were worded negatively for a sub-sample of the respondents. It was concluded that the results reported were not a function of an acquiescence set by the respondents."

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5. Herbert Gans, *The Urban Villagers*, Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1964.

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10. Dale Mann, "Shared Control in Urban Neighborhood Schools," Teachers College, Columbia University, September 1973 (ED 083355).

11. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

12. The phrase is Jurgen Habermas'. See his "Toward a Theory of Communicative Competence," in Hans Peter Dreitzel (ed.), *Recent Sociology No. 2: Patterns of Communicative Behavior*, London: Collier-Macmillan Ltd., 1970, pp. 115-148.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 117.

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17. George Gerbner, "Teacher Image in Mass Culture: Symbolic Functions of the 'Hidden Curriculum,'" In David R. Olson (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 470-497, 476. "The 'facts of life' in the symbolic world form patterns that I call the 'hidden curriculum'."

18. U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *The Federal Civil Rights Enforcement Effort – 1974*, Volume 1: To Regulate in the Public Interest, Washington D.C., November 1974, pp. 2-3.

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29. Mechanisms to reduce community isolation are suggested in Eugene Litwak, *et. al.*, "Community Participation in Bureaucratic Organizations: Principles and Strategies," *Interchange*, Vol. 1, No. 4, 1970, pp. 44-60; Dale Mann, "A Principal's Handbook for Shared Control in Urban Community Schools," Teachers College, Columbia University, September 1973 (ED 083356); and Eugene Litwak and Henry J. Meyer, *School, Family, and Neighborhood: The Theory and Practice of School-Community Relations*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1974.

For further information on technical assistance programs designed to improve communications networks, write or call Jean Barabas, Assistant Director, ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York 10027, (212) 678-3438.

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